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ABSTRACT

An innovative field-based teacher education program was planned and implemented by the Georgia College School of Education and the Bibb County (Georgia) School System. A program goal was to establish a research base demonstrating that field-based models support teacher preparation better than do on-campus models. A study was conducted to describe and document students' perceptions of the characteristics they possessed as they entered the field-based program in an attempt to understand the behaviors exhibited by these students (N=20), particularly how these behaviors differed from behaviors of campus-based teacher preparation students (N=18). Data were derived from open-ended information forms completed by both groups and from audiotaped interviews with future teachers, on-site instructors, and the campus liaison. Consistent with the literature, both groups were interested in human service, had a love of and desire to work with children, and viewed the caring aspects of teaching as more important than the academic role. Themes identified through data analysis did not reveal clearly stated differences in the perceptions of the two groups of future teachers who, in fact, were more similar than different. There was some evidence to suggest that field-based future teachers were more confident in their abilities to become effective teachers. A copy of the 12-item descriptive information survey form is appended. (Contains 30 references.) (LL)

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Perceptions of Characteristics of Candidates in Two Teacher Education Programs

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Field-Based Teacher Preparation Programs
Georgia College - Macon Campus

Despite decades of study, we know very little about the characteristics necessary for becoming an effective classroom teacher. Teacher educators agree that classroom teachers should have a thorough understanding of the students--their interests, their background knowledge, their particular learning needs, etc. But we know very little about the characteristics that classroom teachers need to move from being an untrained, unskilled college student to being a skilled, knowledgeable professional teacher.

Most of the research related to characteristics of future teachers has centered on investigations during student teaching or practice teaching experiences (Borko, 1989). Borko presented a thorough review of attributes that future teachers exhibited early in the professional education program as an aid to planners of teacher preparation programs. As important as Borko's review was for schools of education, we believed the literature did not reveal the information we needed to guide the study of future teachers in an innovative field-based teacher preparation programs. It was evident early in the field-based program that the future teachers exhibited professional and personal behaviors not obvious among the campus-based future teachers. In our attempt understand these behaviors we decided to examine the information from the field-based future teachers' descriptive information form. This form was a part of their admissions process (Attachment 1). Data gathered from the descriptive information form provided a basis for examining similarities and differences of perceptions with a group of campus-based future teachers who also completed the descriptive information forms. We believed these two sets of data would provide some explanation for the behaviors of the field-based future students.

Field-Based Teacher Preparation Program

The field-based teacher preparation program was planned and implemented by the Georgia College, School of Education, in cooperation with the Bibb County School System. We believed that the more classroom experiences future teachers were involved in, the better prepared they will be for the complexities of classrooms. One of the goals of the program was to establish a research base indicating that the field-based model supported teacher preparation better than on-campus models.

As part of the admissions process the field-based future teachers commited approximately 7 hours each day to the program: 60% of the time in classrooms and 40% with college instructors. The junior and senior course work flowed across three quarters each academic year in an

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interdisciplinary and holistic mnanner. Future teachers spend one quarter at each grade level specified by the teaching certificate they were seeking and moved through schools representative of all socio-economic populations. For the sixth and last quarter the students selected the classroom teacher and grade level for their formal student teaching experiences.

Each participating public school had a cadre of master classroom teachers who worked as "teachers of teachers." The future teachers were treated as "teachers" by the classroom teacher, school faculty and staff. They were expected to conduct themselves as professionals from the first through the last assignment. The on-site college instructor provided the essential links from future teachers to classroom teachers to college instructors. A campus liaison provided the essential connections to the School of Education.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to describe and document students' perceptions of the characteristics they possessed as they entered the field-based teacher preparation program in an attempt to understand the behaviors exhibited by these students, particularly how these behaviors differed from campus-based teacher preparation students. The major research question was:

1. How similar or different were the field-based students' perceptions of their characteristics from the campus-based students' perceptions of their characteristics upon entry into a teacher preparation program?

Methodology

Participants

Field-Based Students A cohort of 20 early childhood majors enrolled in an innovative field-based teacher preparation program participated in the study. The majors were recruited through area newspapers, radio and television announcements, and flyer distribution at the area junior colleges. Several organizational meetings and personal interviews preceded formal admission into the field-based program.

Campus-Based Students A cohort of 18 early childhood majors enrolled in a campus-based, traditional teacher preparation program participated in the study. These students had transferred from area junior colleges or they were beginning their third year at GC.

Instruments

Descriptive Information Form Each prospective field-based student was asked to complete the open-ended Descriptive Information Form as part of the admissions process (Attachment 1). The campus-based students completed the form at the researchers' request. The items on the form evolved from the combined effort of a five-member committee

from the Department of Curriculum and Instruction and the Dean of the School of Education. The intent of the form was to provide information for research, collect handwriting and composition samples, and gather information to be used in interviews with prospective students.

Data Collection Procedures

Interviews The data analysis from the Descriptive Information Form revealed patterns and themes in the responses to the open-ended items. To further understand and clarify emerging patterns, informal interviews were conducted with future teachers, on-site instructor, and campus liaison. Information from these interviews was incorporated as needed for clarification.

Audio Tapes The on-site instructor recorded a summary of each encounter with the field-based future teachers including interesting anecdotes and observations. Information from the tapes was used as needed for clarification.

Analysis of Data Responses on the 12 items from the Descriptive Information Form were coded systematically according to each respondent's answers. The data were analyzed for commonalities, differences, and emerging patterns and themes. The constant comparative method of analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used to discover relationships and distinctions among the data. The use of three sources of information, interviews, audio tapes, and the Descriptive Information Forms, made triangulation possible. The principle of thematic consistency with other studies was used in the study. That is, studies related to identifying future teachers' perceptions of their characteristics were referenced and connections to these studies were addressed. Application of this principle may support, or in some instance may not support, the claims of the qualitative researchers.

Discussion of Themes

In this section the discovered themes will be discussed and related to other studies when appropriate. Overwhelmingly the reasons given for wanting to become a teacher centered around human service reasons with a particular interest in, and love for, children. Both field-based and campus-based future teachers reported that their primary reason for selecting teaching as a career was the desire to work with children.

This finding reflected the results of earlier studies of similar groups of potential teachers. Brookhart and Freeman (1992) found that the primary reasons cited for choosing teaching as a career included altruistic, service-oriented goals. Richards (1960) and Fox (1961) suggested that teaching is selected as a career by persons who want to help children, who have a desire to impart knowledge to children, and those who believed teaching was good preparation for family life. Jantzen (1981) reviewed and summarized data collected between 1946 and 1979 and concluded that interest in children was the reason most given by entering teacher candidates in the California University system.

A second theme indicated that both groups of future teachers viewed the nurturing and caring aspects of a classroom teacher's role as more important than the academic role. The field-based future teachers' responses indicated patterns of affective attributes such as caring, accepting, encouraging whereas the campus-based future teachers' responses included affective attributes such as friend, patience, respect, helpful. Missing from the responses was any connection between their role as teacher and their role as dispenser of knowledge.

A pattern of responses of the field-based future teachers indicated that teachers from kindergarten to third grades or tenth through twelfth grades exhibited the characteristics they desired most. The campus-based respondents identified high school and college teachers as those exhibiting characteristics judged most desirable. Such a selection by the campus-based group may be explained by the fact that they had experienced no hiatus in their college work whereas many of the field-based respondents had not attended college recently. Interestingly, no respondent in either group identified a middle grades teacher who exemplified the nurturing and caring characteristics they believed to be important.

A third theme revealed a high level of confidence in their abilities to be successful as teachers while their perceptions of the characteristics necessary for becoming teachers centered on affective attributes. Both groups described themselves as self-starters using the terms highly motivated, organized, leader, organized, punctual, creative. The campus-based respondents added these: like people, independent, set and achieve goals, want to help children, cooperative, religious. The field-based respondents added these terms: energetic, responsible, initiator, dedicated, fun loving, perfectionist, good natured, confident, conscientious, have strong family support, enjoy people, effective communicator, risk-taker, assertive, talkative.

Additionally, the field-based respondents described their high level of confidence in their own ability by describing themselves as they had described their favorite teachers. These terms included patient, caring, loving, understanding, friendly, helpful. Weinstein (1989) found that entering teacher candidates tend to describe themselves as having or desiring to have the same characteristics as their favorite teachers. Weinstein used the label, unrealistic optimism, to describe the degree of confidence found in entry level teacher candidates.

Although seeing the connection between practica and college courses in becoming an effective classroom teacher was seen as emerging in the responses, several responses reflected a level of naivete common to persons who have yet to understand or experience the complexities of the classroom and teaching. There is more to teaching than caring for children. Most novices tend to place emphasis on interpersonal aspects of teaching and minimize the importance of academic goals (Weinstein, 1990; Book et al., 1983).

Book and Freeman (1986) reported findings related to feelings of self confidence in entry level teacher candidates. There was some

evidence that the level of self confidence was a function of age, with older students exhibiting a higher level of self confidence than younger students (Brookhart et al., 1990). The level of confidence appeared to be higher among the older, non-traditional, field-based respondents.

Both campus-based and field-based respondents viewed the role of parents and home as important, the fourth theme. The campus-based respondents viewed parents as primary teachers who reinforced school initiated learning. The field-based respondents, however, interpreted the role of parents in education as an extension of the classroom teacher's role. They viewed the role of parents as supervising homework, attending PTA, and going on field trips. A traditional view of parents' role by the field-based respondents may be a result of first hand experience with their very own children and their children's teachers whereas the campus-based respondents were responding from a view of themselves as students in college classrooms. Veenman's review (1984) found beginning teachers problems that caused the most stress were discipline, assessment, and working with parents.

Interviews with respondents clarified the patterns related to their experiences working with children of ethnic groups other than their own, the fifth theme. The interviews confirmed that the experiences were limited. Both written and oral responses, however, indicated a willingness to work in classrooms with children from all ethnic groups and children who were representative of different socio-economic backgrounds. Teacher educators cannot take such willingness lightly. Cazden and Mehan (1989) concluded that it is futile to attempt to transmit information about specific cultures to future or beginning teachers. We must help future teachers learn how to learn experientially about children and their families and encourage reflection on their cultural background rather than encourage them to search for nonexistent written descriptions of cultural differences. A pattern that emerged indicated that the field-based respondents viewed the field-based program as an effective way to learn to teach <u>all</u> children. Reynolds (1992) observed that teacher novices treat cultural differences as a problem, not as a natural phenomenon that it is. There was not evidence in the responses that either group regarded ethnic diversity as a potential problem.

There was no obvious indication that the respondents believed their exposure to children (limited but varied) had given them special insights into the cognitive abilities of children of any culture. The work of McDiarmid (1990) indicated that entering teacher candidates believed young children do not understand much and cannot handle complicated ideas. Interviews with the on-site instructor and several students revealed that the respondents believed that children were "pretty smart" and they would be challenged to "stay ahead" of children in a classroom setting.

The field-based respondents believed that intensive field experiences would better prepare them for the complexities of the classroom, the last identified theme. The theme that emerged indicated the field-based respondents saw a connection between the amount of time spent in classrooms with children and effective teacher preparation.

One respondent said she did not fully understand the field-based program yet but just knowing that she would be in many classrooms with children was "good enough for me." Another respondent commented that knowing that she would be assigned to all grade levels would help her decide which grade to teach. One respondent stated, "This program will give me the opportunity to learn how to teach."

Discussion of Research Question and Recommendations for Future Research

The purpose of the study was to describe and document students' perceptions of the characteristics they possessed as they entered the field based teacher preparation program in an attempt to understand the behaviors exhibited by these students, particularly how these behaviors differed from campus-based preparation students. The themes identified through analysis of data, informal interviews, and audio tapes did not reveal clearly stated differences in the perceptions of the two groups of future teachers. We suggest that the two groups of students were more similar than different in their perceptions of themselves upon entry into teacher preparation programs.

The study revealed several areas in which further investigation can occur. For example, there was some evidence that the field-based future teachers were more confident in their abilities to become effective teachers than were the campus-based future teachers. The field-based future teachers believed that the daily field experiences in classrooms would best prepare them as classroom teachers.

The identified themes can be used to support further research in several areas. The values and motivation levels of the non-traditional student may contribute to the behaviors we observed that make them appear to be different from the campus-based group. The sense of community observed among the field-based group, the facilities used for college classes, and the role of the on-site instructor should be explored. Grades earned, Scholastic Aptitude Tests scores, and Senior Exit Test scores may be investigated.

More qualitative research is needed in all areas related to the teacher preparation experience. Observational studies or case studies of entering teacher candidates enrolled in field-based teacher preparation programs would provide important insights into the entering teacher candidates' relationship with children in the complex classroom environment. This information in turn would inform teacher education planners of both traditional and innovative preparation programs.

There is a need to continue the search for the best potential entry level teacher candidates. Hollingsworth (1989) found that beliefs of entering teacher candidates about teaching and learning determine the beliefs they will hold as experienced teachers. Teacher preparation programs of any kind can expect to have very little influence on the beliefs about teaching and learning that entry level teacher candidates hold. If change is so difficult, the challenge for teacher educators is to research diligently to identify the characteristics of successful

teachers and in turn look for potential teachers who exhibit these characteristics.

There is a need for research based both on theory and history. At present most of the studies of entry level teacher candidates have been determined by convenience of measurement only (Brookhart & Freeman, 1992) which translates into the use of standardized instruments. Qualitative methodology including techniques from ethnography will provide useful data.

In the education environment of the 1990s when we are experiencing basic theoretical change, there needs to be investigation of entry level teacher candidates' beliefs and characteristics relating Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist theory. For example, how do entering teacher candidates' perceptions of self and personal beliefs about teaching and learning align with constructivist principles of learning and teaching? How does this theoretical framework inform as the candidates attempt to make sense of the complexities of the classroom? How do entry level teacher candidates become Whole Language teachers or constructivist teachers in a field-based teacher preparation program or a campus-based program? What is the status of these two groups of teachers in three years? in five years?

There is a place for research based on history. For example, a review of changes in employment during recent years suggested that persons may choose teaching as a career for reasons other than those categorized as service oriented or altruistic. Women and minorities were limited to service oriented careers for many years. We need to know how these historical changes are affecting the entering teacher candidate (Brookhart & Freeeman, 1992). Why do persons choose teaching careers in the 1990s? How do candidates build bridges or make connections between their desire to nurture children and the community's pressure for academic achievement? How can we use research findings to inform both traditional and innovative teacher preparation programs?

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Descriptive Information on Prospective Students

The Committee to review prospective students requests that you provide us with responses to a series of questions and statements to give us a sample of your writing and to provide us with descriptive information on your background and experiences.

1. Individuals are attracted to teaching for a variety ot reasons. What are some of your reasons for wanting to be a teacher?

2. Describe one of your favorite teachers and why he or she was your favorite teacher.

3. Please describe your most disliked teacher and why he or she was your most disliked teacher.

4. Describe one of the best experiences that you've ever had in school.

5. Describe the worst experience that you've had in school.

6. Participants in this program must be self-starters... highly motivated individuals. Describe yourself and indicate your qualities that make you this type of person.

7. What type of activities do you enjoy when you have leisure time? Please be specific.

8. Discuss how you feel about the role of the family in education.

9. What experiences have you had working with children (baby sitting, volunteer work, organizing children's games in your neighborhood, substitute teaching, etc.)

10. Have you ever worked with any children of an ethnic group other than your own? If so, how would you describe your experiences?

11. If your grade point average is below 2.50, explain why you should still be considered for this program.

12. As you consider this program, describe what you expect to gain from participating in it.

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